

18-28 EAST MOUNT VERNON PLACE
(Brownstone Row)
Mount Vernon Place
18-28 East Mount Vernon Place
Baltimore
Independent City
Maryland

HABS MD-1176
MD-1176

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
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18–28 E. MOUNT VERNON PLACE (Brownstone Row)

HABS No. MD–1176

LOCATION: 18–28 E. Mount Vernon Place, north side, Baltimore, Baltimore County, Maryland.

SIGNIFICANCE:

As an ensemble, Nos. 18–28 E. Mount Vernon Place (“Brownstone Row”) stand as a particularly important stretch of urban houses facing the parks extending from the Washington Monument. Constructed between 1852 and 1854, they are both a significant instance of speculative housing intended for elite Baltimoreans as well as a superlative example of the use of brownstone in residential structures, a popular material for some high-end antebellum townhouses in Baltimore. Although it appears that the row of six houses was initially designed and construction overseen by master builder-contractor Michael Roche, ultimately local architect Louis L. Long became involved and directed the project to fruition.¹

HISTORIAN: James A. Jacobs.

DESCRIPTION:

The six brownstone dwellings at Nos. 18–28 E. Mount Vernon Place descend in pairs from west to east along the north side of E. Mount Vernon Place. Each unit contains three stories over a raised basement with a full, though not readily apparent, attic story. They are constructed of brick and fronted in brownstone with carved details of the same material. The main door is accessed via a flight of brownstone stairs, with a secondary door located below the stoop. Each facade is organized into vertical three bays with the stoop and principal door located in the left bay of each dwelling. The first, second, and third floors have openings that diminish in size on each story. The first floor contains windows extending to the floor; some of these openings are fronted by iron window guards of varying generations. The doors and windows are topped by gently arched hoods and contained within fully-carved frames. Most of the exterior (vestibule) doors are doubled and contain rectangular lights with coved corners; small rosettes are located in the coves. The doors are topped by transoms with arches that follow the curve of the hood. The roofline is defined by oversized bracketed cornices, most bearing small rectangular windows. The brackets and window hoods are part of the architectural vocabulary that defines the Italianate tradition, which was popular for residential design during the second half of the nineteenth century.

¹For additional information related to row houses and urban townhouses in Baltimore see the reports for the Decatur Miller House, HABS No. MD–1175; Belvidere Terrace, HABS No. MD–1177; the Graham-Hughes House, HABS No. MD–1178; and the Addendum to Residence Row, HABS No. MD–399.

The corner unit at No. 28 has its brick lateral and rear walls painted white and the top of the lateral wall terminates in a stepped parapet. Two fire escapes, one each on the lateral and rear walls, extend down from the attic story.

When considering urban attached houses one feature of Brownstone Row is especially noteworthy when considering the typology nationally, but common to the interior arrangement of houses in Baltimore. When generally considering rows of attached houses, particularly ones that were part of a single development, primary entrances in the street facade were often arranged in pairs. This pattern stemmed from the frequent employment of floor plans that included rear setback wings, or “ells,” whereby a three-room-deep plan mirrored that of the immediate neighbors. This mirroring was used so that the center room, with natural light and ventilation admitted through a window opening onto an areaway formed by the setback, would benefit with even more exposure than back-to-back areaways provided. On the street face, adjacent reflective plans resulted in a distinct pattern of pairs of doors, often sharing the same stair or stoop. While Baltimore possesses many rows with reflected ell plans and pairs of doors on the principal elevation, the city also popularized another pattern, again with the form of the plan and the elevation intimately linked. This pattern is demonstrated by Brownstone Row, which contains six houses possessing identical facades with the principal entry located in the elevation’s left bay. The houses’ rectangular footprints span the lots’ full widths, creating a situation where the mirroring of plans, and by extension street elevations, was unnecessary. The houses originally contained identical floor plans with two primary rooms on each floor in addition to the stairwell and subsidiary spaces.²

HISTORY:

In December 1852 the *Baltimore Sun* reported that builder-contractor Michael Roche was “now engaged in the work of erecting a row of six large four-story dwellings, of the first class, at the intersection of St. Paul’s street and Mount Vernon Place.”³ At a time when the architectural profession in the United States remained highly fluid and backgrounds varied, Roche clearly possessed competence and ability in design and construction, at least in regard to residential structures. The Baltimore city directory printed in 1847 lists a “Mr. Roche” as a carpenter and it is likely that this is the same man who by the 1853 printing had risen to

²The interior arrangement was generally discussed in “Elegant Improvement,” *Baltimore Sun* 2 Aug. 1853: (1), while they were still under construction. It noted that the first floor was to contain “two large parlors” and a “library room,” in addition to entrance, primary stair, and undoubtedly, a secondary service stair. In attached houses bearing a two-room-deep plan, the staircase was often inserted in a well between the front and back rooms, with diffused light extending downward from a skylight. The “library room” mentioned for the houses of Brownstone Row might refer to the space contained within a one-story extension placed at the rear of the first floor. An 1890 Sanborn map indicates that at least three of the houses had received significant rear additions, however Nos. 20 and 24 still maintained smaller footprints. Given their identical footprints and the 1853 description, it is likely that the first floor arrangement was originally the same for all of the houses. Sanborn Map Company, *Sanborn Maps for Baltimore, Maryland*, vol. 2 (New York: 1890), 57.

³“More Elegant Improvements,” *Baltimore Sun* 17 Dec. 1852: (1). At times Michael Roche’s surname is spelled “Roach,” however the city directories and most newspaper articles use the “Roche” spelling.

“Michael Roche, Architect.”⁴ The title was likely self-proclaimed; however, as he was described in 1850 as “one of [Baltimore’s] most experienced and competent master builders.”⁵ Regardless, Roche clearly possessed commendable skills in house construction, and the fact that the *Baltimore Sun* failed to refer to him as an “architect” did not diminish their admiration for him. The same article favorably reported that, “on his own risk,” Roche transformed an area adjacent to Washington Place (Center Street, between St. Paul and Charles streets) from a block of “miserable little shanties...pig pens, stables, and other unattractive structures” into a stretch of “handsome dwellings...now all occupied by highly respectable tenants, the most of them being owned by their occupants,” including Roche himself.⁶ At the time of this construction, he was funding another row of speculative houses on the other side of the squares, as well as superintending new houses for another investor. His capacity to build first rate houses bearing both “elegance” as well as “all the modern improvements and conveniences” as well as his initiative to take risks in order to visually improve the urban landscape were much esteemed by the residents of a rapidly expanding city. Given this outlook, the choice to hire Roche for the planning and construction of a speculative project of six houses facing Mount Vernon Square east was an easy one.

Colonel Richard France provided the capital necessary for this high-profile speculative development. France was best known as the celebrated “lottery king” of Baltimore. His success in managing large-scale lotteries in Maryland ultimately led to the state of Delaware sanctioning an official relationship in 1859 whereby France received a twenty-year monopoly on state lotteries in exchange for \$720,000 earmarked for public improvements.⁷ As planned, the six spacious four-story houses were to be faced in brownstone on the first-floor only with brick above and display “the best materials” and “a highly ornamental finish.”⁸ Excavations for the project began late in 1852.⁹

Six months into the project the area experienced “a violent storm of wind...[that] blew with tremendous fury.”¹⁰ The *Baltimore Sun* further reported: “such was the violence of the storm that a considerable destruction of property was occasioned,” including one new house that was entirely destroyed and another whose tin roof “was torn and rolled up in a coil as if it were paper.”¹¹ Unfortunately for France and Roche, their development of “houses in the course of erection...on Monument street, [was] also injured.”¹² The more intriguing aspect of this storm and its aftermath is not so much the damage and subsequent delay in completing construction, but rather that after the fact, architect Louis L. Long becomes associated with the structure’s design and “builder and contractor” Michael Roche reduced

⁴*Matchett’s Baltimore Directory* (Baltimore, 1847), 281; *Matchett’s Baltimore Directory* (Baltimore, 1853), 256, both accessed online, 23 Jan. 2004, <http://www.mdarchives.state.md.us/>.

⁵“Elegant and Extensive Improvements,” *Baltimore Sun* 13 Dec. 1850: (1).

⁶*Ibid.*

⁷Vol. 11 Del.L. 594 (1859), as conveyed in footnote seven of the Opinion of Chief Justice Daniel L. Hermann and Justice William Duffy, Supreme Court of Delaware, 385 A.2d 695, accessed online, 5 Jun. 2003, <http://www2.tlc.ttu.edu/Cochran/Gaming%20Law/pari-mutuel.htm>, for France-Delaware agreement.

⁸“More Elegant Improvements.”

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰“A Tornado—Destruction of Property,” *Baltimore Sun* 4 Jun. 1853: (1).

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²*Ibid.*

to the status of “bricklayer.”¹³ The reason for this change is not known. Given the storm’s reported ferocity and widespread damage, as well as Roche’s solid reputation and the fact that he remained involved with the project, it seems unlikely that France blamed him for any structural failures. Additionally, the contemporary patterns of reporting in the *Baltimore Sun* for residential projects, make it unlikely that Louis L. Long would have been responsible for the initial design and not mentioned in the first article mentioning the development. Perhaps France was satisfied with Roche’s construction ability, but found his aesthetic sensibilities lacking for such an important speculative project, and he used the damage as an opportunity to utilize what he deemed a better design. Regardless, within two months of the storm, the row whose fronts were to be of brownstone only on the first story, were described in this manner: “the fronts are pronounced superior to any Connecticut brown stone work; they are elaborately wrought from the solid block, with fine architectural proportions, and present an artistic design which pleases the eye, and adds to the *coup d’œil* of the Place.”¹⁴ The facades were now to be entirely faced in brownstone and the houses, inside and out, “to be finished in a rare and magnificent style of work.”¹⁵

Despite being acknowledged in the *Baltimore Sun* as an “architect,” less is known about Long’s abilities than Roche. A 1998 letter regarding Long stated: “he is one of our mystery men. The earliest work we know is 1854, the latest 1860, about two dozen works spread through 7 years.”¹⁶ His substantiated commissions during that period include: the steeple of St. Alphonsus Church (1855); St. Ignatius Church (1856); Immaculate Conception Church (1857); and the “Robert Q. Long” building, Fayette Street (1860).¹⁷ Structures attributed to him particularly relevant to Brownstone Row in that they were large residences constructed in the Mount Vernon neighborhood are the brownstone dwellings at Nos. 103 and 105 W. Monument Street and the long demolished Greco-Roman Garrett House formerly located at the southwest corner of Cathedral and Monument streets across from the Decatur Miller House.¹⁸ While the bulk of Long’s biography remains elusive, he apparently was no relation to important local architects Robert Cary Long, Sr. and Robert Cary Long, Jr.¹⁹

The August 1853 article announcing changes to France’s speculative development noted that the “second stories are progressing with activity” and the houses were planned “to be

¹³“More Elegant Improvements,” for “builder and contractor;” “Elegant Improvement.”

¹⁴“Elegant Improvement.”

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶James T. Wollon to Richard J. Cawthon, 24 Aug. 1998, Historical Research Files, Baltimore Architecture Foundation (BAF), Baltimore, Maryland.

¹⁷References to these commissions are drawn from BAF. The specific references from that database are as follows: St. Alphonsus Church steeple, *Baltimore Sun* 15 Oct. 1855, mentioned in a list compiled by James T. Wollon; St. Ignatius Church, noted in a letter from James T. Wollon to St. Peter’s Roman Catholic Church, Westernport, Maryland, 27 Apr. 1999; information for St. Ignatius is also found in a few published sources, including John Dorsey and James D. Dilts, *A Guide to Baltimore Architecture* (Centreville, MD: Tidewater Publishers, 1981), 12; Immaculate Conception Church, *Republican & Argus* 20 Nov. 1857, topic of a letter from John McGrain, Baltimore County Landmarks Preservation Commission to James T. Wollon, 26 Apr. 1994; “Robert Q. Long” building, *Baltimore Sun* 11 Apr. 1860, mentioned in letter from John McGrain to James T. Wollon, 17 Jan. 1995.

¹⁸BAF. For more information about the Decatur Miller House see HABS No. MD–1175.

¹⁹Wollon to Cawthon, 24 Aug. 1998, BAF.

completed early in the spring [of 1854].”²⁰ The projected interior room arrangement followed Baltimore convention whereby regardless of whether the principal entry was directly onto the first floor or the ground floor, the ground floor contained the formal dining room with the other public rooms above. This common local arrangement placing the dining room adjacent to the integral kitchen differed from an organizational approach known popularly as the “New York” plan whereby double parlors and a formal dining room all occupied the principal story.²¹ As with other period houses, those comprising Brownstone Row possessed private family chambers and servants spaces on the upper stories.²² Overall France’s published goal for the development hints at the suggested reason for Roche’s apparent replacement by Long after the storm damage:

Every convenience which art and human ingenuity can invent will be introduced throughout; whilst the materials, manner of executing the work, and style of finish have been chosen without regard to cost, it being the determination of the liberal projector and owner to present a block of princely mansions which cannot be surpassed in this country.²³

Obviously already in possession of the development rights, on 19 January 1854 Richard France purchased from William Key Howard at least the lots at Nos. 18, 20, and 24 (formerly 44, 42, and 38, respectively).²⁴ In purchasing the lots France owned the lots “fee simple”—meaning both the lot and the structure built on it, a most desirable situation in a city where the ground rent system of real estate ownership and development held fast. Despite this transaction and despite a prediction that the new houses would be completed early in 1854 it seems that they were not finished that year as no announcement of the kind appeared in the *Baltimore Sun* during its entirety, and the 1855–1856 city directory does not list occupants at the properties.²⁵ Sometime in the period 1856–1857, construction was finished on the “princely” dwellings and France rented the houses to his first tenants.²⁶ As

²⁰“Elegant Improvement.”

²¹See “Magnificent Residence,” *Baltimore Sun* 6 Sep. 1853: (1) and “Elegant and Extensive Improvements,” *Baltimore Sun* 13 Dec. 1850: (1), for reference to use of this plan in new Baltimore houses.

²²“Elegant Improvement.”

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴“Trustee’s Sale of Valuable Fee Simple Property on Mount Vernon Place,” *American and Commercial Advertiser* 2 Dec. 1862, clipping located in vertical file, neighborhoods—Mount Vernon, Maryland Historical Society (MHS), Baltimore, Maryland. Part of lot no. 24 (38) was sold to Richard France by William A. Moale and his wife on 30 Apr. 1856. A typescript entitled “Mount Vernon Place and West Monument Street” and located in the “Mt. Vernon Place [General]” file in the subject files at MHS noted that all six of the lots passed from Howard to France on that day.

²⁵Using information from the Passano Architectural Files, MHS, it was possible to gain a list of the houses’ perceived initial occupants. The 1855–1856 Matchett’s directory, printed in 1855 and to be used during the following two years, placed the Baltimoreans at other addresses. The 1856–1857 Woods’ directory, printed in 1857, corresponded with the information available in the Passano files. Using the place name “Mount Vernon Place”—appearing in all of the 1856–1857 addresses—a search of the 1855–1856 Matchett’s directory yielded no hits for Nos. 34 to 44, the house numbers for Brownstone Row. Accordingly, it is only possible to initially place the first occupants in the dwellings over some period during 1856–1857.

²⁶Contrary to modern concepts of affluence, rental of houses was common to all social strata. Although somewhat greater numbers of middle- and upper-income Americans owned their houses in the nineteenth century, homeownership alone is not a useful indicator of class.

they were likely the largest, most opulent, and best fitted-out houses available in Baltimore that were not specifically commissioned by a single family, their rapid renting by Otho H. Williams (No. 44), William H. Brune (No. 42), and William Crichton (No. 36), all involved in commercial pursuits, and Thomas W. Hall (No. 38), a stock broker, indicates that they were well received. One unit (No. 34) was rented by Margaret Riggs, of whom little is known. Despite obvious success with this investment, by 1862, France experienced a reversal of fortunes as he was stripped of his direction of the Delaware lotteries and criminal chargers were lodged against him.²⁷ France's monetary and legal troubles led to units of Brownstone Row being offered for purchase through a trustee's sale, indicating that he had gone bankrupt.²⁸ Nos. 38, 42, and 44 Mount Vernon Place went up for sale, fee simple, and five years after completion the properties were still were described as "finished in the very best style throughout;" nos. 42 and 44 both included private stables in back as well.²⁹

Throughout the nineteenth and early in the twentieth centuries, most of the units went through a series of owners, but remained single-family houses; this pattern changed in the 1920s and 1930s when Nos. 20, 22, 24, and 28 were converted into multiunit apartment houses.³⁰ In 1928 No. 18, was purchased by the Lutheran Board of Missions and used as organizational offices, and No. 26 was the last house on Mount Vernon Place to remain a single residence until its 1989 conversion into apartments.³¹

SOURCES:

Advertisement. Baltimore Daily Gazette 27 May 1863. Passano Architectural Files.
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<http://www2.tlhc.ttu.edu/Cochran/Gaming%20Law/pari-mutuel.htm>.

Historical Research Files. Baltimore Architecture Foundation. Baltimore, Maryland.

"Magnificent Residence." Baltimore Sun 6 Sep. 1853: (1).

²⁷Vol. 12 Del.L. 219 (1862), as conveyed in footnote seven of the Opinion of Chief Justice Daniel L. Herrmann and Justice William Duffy, Supreme Court of Delaware, 385 A.2d 695, accessed online, 5 Jun. 2003, <http://www2.tlhc.ttu.edu/Cochran/Gaming%20Law/pari-mutuel.htm>, for Delaware lottery.

²⁸"Trustee's Sale of Valuable Fee Simple Property on Mount Vernon Place."

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Passano, MHS; "Mount Vernon Place and West Monument Street," typescript, MHS.

³¹Ibid.

Matchett's Baltimore Directory. 1847-1848. 1853-1854. 1855-1856.

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Woods Baltimore Directory. 1856-1857.

ADDENDUM TO:
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